**988 Lifeline offers a chance to transform policing in the U.S.**

[**https://apbweb.com/2023/12/988-lifeline-offers-a-chance-to-transform-policing-in-the-u-s/**](https://apbweb.com/2023/12/988-lifeline-offers-a-chance-to-transform-policing-in-the-u-s/)

A phone with headphones around it

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You wouldn’t expect an electrician to repair your leaking sink, just as you’d never think to have a veterinarian fix your broken leg.

Yet in cities across the U.S., law enforcement officers are often called upon to respond to a wide range of situations, whether they are best suited to address them or not.

I have spent more than 30 years working to improve police practices, first as an officer with the San Antonio Police Department and now as the deputy division director of law enforcement at the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center. So, I understand firsthand how this plays out. For far too long, Americans have relied on law enforcement to be the first responders to crises with few options for supporting people in need. And too many instances of police encounters with people in crisis result in tragedy rather than connections to needed services.

Now, we have another option.

*For the well-being of every officer and community member in crisis, let’s do the work together to adopt, employ  
and wholeheartedly champion 988 now.*

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, which became a nationwide service in July 2022, offers people a direct connection to trained crisis counselors via phone, text and chat. By matching people in crisis with the most appropriate response they require, 988 has the potential to transform the way we approach policing across the country, freeing up officers to focus on critical police work, such as responding to violent incidents. Furthermore, as it grows, 988 can reduce the police burden of handling mental health calls that busy or understaffed departments often face.

With the right support, 988 can be the alternative response that communities have been asking for. Now, from anywhere in the country, 988 counselors can de-escalate and connect people to services and treatment, including to national resources that local law enforcement may not be aware of. These call-takers also bring expertise in responding to the mental health needs of children and young people and have the training and technology to be a resource to rural and underresourced communities. Additionally, because many crises can be handled over the phone, 988 is a powerful tool to avoid the escalation that can occur when a uniformed officer is involved. This increases safety for both community members and responding officers.

Transformation on this scale is never easy. Trust me, I know. Like countless officers across our great nation, I’ve spent years trying to serve the communities I worked in to the best of my capabilities. But now, more than ever, law enforcement agencies must step up and say that they cannot — and should not — be the default option for every mental health crisis call.

In recent years, many law enforcement agencies have risen to the challenge of partnering with behavioral health providers to better respond to people with mental health needs. This includes crisis intervention and co-responder teams that the CSG Justice Center has helped support, in partnership with the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), a component of the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs, for the past 20 years. While these are great steps forward, too often, people are still dialing 9-1-1 for emergencies that are better suited for other professionals. I believe the nationwide 988 Lifeline makes this transformation possible on a scale never seen before.

In collaboration with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and BJA, we at the CSG Justice Center are prepared to support local efforts to increase coordination between law enforcement and 988 partners. Just as we have provided guidance through the national peer network of law enforcement–mental health learning sites, we are now working with law enforcement groups and criminal justice, behavioral health and community partners to support a new vision of coordinated public safety and crisis systems.

But we cannot do this work alone. It will take collective action to make this shared vision a reality.

Law enforcement’s embrace of this new approach to crisis response and its ongoing collaboration with behavioral health partners will be key to the success of the 988 transition. As someone who knows the need for 988 firsthand, I urge law enforcement leaders and all officers to act without further delay. Now is the time for us to rise to the occasion in a new way, as a core partner in the solution that communities — and officers — have been asking for: ensuring that every caller gets the right response to address their needs.

For the well-being of every officer and community member in crisis, let’s do the work together to adopt, employ and wholeheartedly champion 988 now. It is ready, it is cost-free and it will bring about the change we vitally need.

Visit *tinyurl.com/2p8c9zmu*for more information and resources to support your community’s efforts to successfully transition to 988.